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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000151

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ DECLARES SUDDEN HOLIDAY TO HONOR HIMSELF

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. President Chavez declared on February 1 that February 2 would be a holiday to celebrate his ten years in power. The Venezuelan president's surprise was late, and the vague announcement of this last minute holiday created considerable confusion at businesses, schools, and other institutions, most of which chose not to open to avoid government threats of fines. National Guardsmen, other law enforcement entities, and pro-Chavez supporters on motorcycles in Caracas and several states forced many shops and markets which had opened to close. Chavez, in a nighttime February 2 press interview, nevertheless denied that his government obliged anyone to adhere to his sudden decree. Chavez himself worked on February 2, hosting leaders from Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Dominica, and Cuba at the Fourth Annual Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA). Chavez's decree was a pointed pre-referendum reminder of the tremendous power he wields. End Summary.

Ten Years of Revolution

12. (SBU) President Chavez declared February 2 a national holiday to commemorate the tenth anniversary of his taking office. Chavez buried the announcement in his February 1 "The Lines of Chavez" column, which he recently started sending to numerous local newspapers. Chavez wrote, "Venezuela changed, like horses that come from behind, from a dark and impoverished country subordinated to the Yankee empire to a country occupying a brilliant place in the vanguard of peoples' struggles around the world for liberation." Chavez also announced the holiday in a national broadcast on all local radio and television networks the afternoon of February 1.

13. (SBU) A Labor Ministry Vice Minister told the media February 1 that the Venezuelan government would fine any business that opened in violation of Chavez's decree. Because the Venezuelan president made the announcement on a Sunday, there was insufficient time to publish a text of his decree in the National Gazette as of February 3. The text still has not been published after the fact. Consequently, even among businesses and institutions who were aware of the eleventh-hour announcement, there was considerable confusion regarding the extent of the measure. Some Venezuelan businesses, such as supermarkets and pharmacies, operate on national holidays, but pay their employees overtime compensation in accordance with Venezuelan labor law.

Embassy Caracas, like many other embassies in the Venezuelan capital, remained open.

Enforcing The Decree

14. (SBU) Government offices and schools closed on February 2. Most businesses did also, although some firms opened as usual. The Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce (Fedecameras) complained to the local media that members of the National Guard and Caracas Municipal Police forcibly closed enterprises that opened on February 2. Business organizations in several states outside Caracas also protested that law enforcement authorities, and in some cases, pro-Chavez groups on motorbikes, forced shops and markets, and even hospitals and clinics, to close. Business groups noted that the lateness of the decree contributed to the loss of perishable food products and undermined national production and productivity.

15. (SBU) The President of the Private Education Association publicly regretted the loss of another school day in February. Schools will be closed February 23 and 24 for Carnival and are almost certain to be closed in the three days before and one day after the February 15 referendum on eliminating term limits. Venezuela's international schools activated phone trees and adhered to the decree. During a February 2 interview with CNN Espanol, President Chavez denied that anyone was fined or obliged to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his Bolivarian revolution.

The ALBA Summit

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16. (SBU) President Chavez hosted Bolivian President Evo Morales, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, Honduras President Manuel Zelaya, Dominica Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit, and Cuban Vice President Jose Machado for the Fourth Summit of the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA) on February 2. President of Ecuador Rafael Correa joined the other chiefs of state later the same day. All the visiting foreign leaders praised Chavez's Bolivarian revolution in evening remarks to a large red-shirted crowd assembled in a Caracas public plaza under a heavy rain. The Venezuelan government required all local TV and radio networks to carry Chavez's remarks ("en cadena"), in which he predicted victory in the February 15 referendum and reiterated his desire to govern until at least 2019.

Comment

17. (C) President Chavez's announcement of a February 2 holiday to commemorate his ten years in power caught most Venezuelans by surprise and created more confusion than genuine celebration. Venezuelans in middle and upper class neighborhoods banged pots and pans the night of February 2 in a hastily organized protest. Nevertheless, most of the reported criticism did not emanate from the economically disadvantaged sectors of Venezuelan society, which constitutes Chavez's base. The majority of Venezuelans are not focusing on the macroeconomic losses, but rather the short-term personal gains of an extra day off. The Venezuelan president's holiday decree, like his decision last year to create a unique Venezuelan time zone 30 minutes removed from Eastern Standard Time, served as a pointed, pre-referendum reminder of the enormous power Chavez wields. It also eliminated the usual weekday Caracas traffic gridlock and facilitated the movements of the gathered ALBA heads of state as well as the timely mobilization of a respectably large pro-government crowd.

